Review of *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* by Adrienne Mayor (Princeton University Press)

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ABSTRACT In *God and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*, Adrienne Mayor opens up ancient history to new interpretations by adopting a rather capacious definition of technology, one that many scholars of the ancient world—according to Mayor—may reject out of hand. Focusing on biotechne, or artificial life, Mayor accepts any figure from the texts and artifacts of the ancient world which was "made, not born" as a technological creation. Mayor argues that ancient cultural constructions of technology were less about the inner workings of a black box (e.g., a giant metal robot) than about the imagining of such things existing in the first place. In nine chapters, Mayor recasts various myths and figures of the ancient Greek world in this new light. *Gods and Robots* serves as an important step in revealing how the idea of technology has functioned in ways both mythic and material from the beginning of recorded history.

KEYWORDS biotechnology, cultural history, Greek myth, technology

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In *God and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*, Adrienne Mayor opens up ancient history to new interpretations by adopting a rather capacious definition of technology, one that many scholars of the ancient world—according to Mayor—may reject out of hand. Focusing on biotechne, or artificial life, Mayor accepts any figure from the texts and artifacts of the ancient world which was "made, not born" as a technological creation (1). Though many of Mayor's subjects—such as Talos, a bronze automaton that defended Crete from outsiders—were made through divine processes unknown to humans, Mayor argues that ancient cultural constructions of technology were less about the inner workings of a black box (e.g., a giant metal robot) than about the imagining of such things existing in the first place. As Mayor writes, "Ideas about creating artificial life were thinkable long before technology made such enterprises possible. The myths reinforce the notion that imagination is the spirit that unites myth and science" (1). Yet such an interpretation of these ancient stories raises the question of whether it is not precisely the inscrutable nature of so many technologies that encourages us to, like the Titan Epimetheus, accept them into our lives and societies with little forethought.

Of course, the ancient Greeks could not have predicted the rise of the godlike techno-capitalists of the early twenty-first century, not to mention our relatively unbridled embrace of their freely-given technological wonders. Nonetheless, the idea that we might not so eagerly trust those more powerful than us is central to technological myths' resonances through the ages. In *Gods and Robots*, Mayor's new interpretation of many texts and artifacts of ancient mythologies and cultures opens up new ways of thinking about some very old cultural constructions of the relationship between technology and culture. As Mayor argues in the epilogue, technological wonder "might seem a uniquely modern response to the juggernaut of scientific progress in the age of technology" but an ambivalent fascination with technology "surfaced thousands of years ago in the ancient Greek world" (213).

In nine chapters, Mayor recasts various myths and figures of the ancient Greek world in this new light. The aforementioned myth of Talos represents an early expression of the idea that a sort of independent, if limited, form of life might be replicated through technology. Likewise, Medea luring Pelias into a "cauldron of rejuvenation" represents a forebearer of the "hope and horror [that] still coexist in modern Western reactions to 'playing god' with science" (42). Mayor also finds evidence for early prosthetic and augmentative technologies in Celtic and Norse mythology, calling the goddess Freyja an "organic cyborg" (68). Ancient "*techne*-pornography" can be traced back at least as far as the myth of Pasiphae, in which Daedalus—he of the wax wings and Minotaur—built what Mayor calls a "realistic, life-size sex toy" (71). Early philosophical writings on the subjectivity of automata, Mayor argues, presaged the complex work of more contemporary philosophers and ethicists of artificial intelligence. Ancient anxieties about how artificial images and beings could seem eerily lifelike find their contemporary analogy, here, in the phenomenon of the uncanny valley. Mayor finds some unnerving references to these myths in the contemporary world, such as TALOS, a "computerized exoskeleton" being developed by the U.S. military (138). Each of the chapters is illustrated with helpfully-placed reproductions of ancient art representing the myths and figures under discussion.

But as Mayor's overarching interpretation of the relationship between myth and technology suggests, *Gods and Robots* is more about ancient Greek imaginings of technology—or how "mechanical technology, evoked *sebas*, *thauma*, and *thambos* . . . awe, wonder, and astonishment" (102)—than it is about how technology has been wielded as a form of power, both in these stories and in the cultures in which these stories circulated. However, technology and myth do not act as mere vessels for the imagination. For instance, Pygmalion sculpted a sort of semi-living statue that pleased him in a way that "vulgar real women" could not (107). What does this story say about the ancient Greek world's understanding of who could claim technological power and how that power had been or ought to be wielded?

Among the many fascinating exegeses of ancient myths here, Mayor seems to acknowledge these questions about power and technology, noting, for instance, that "one of the essential motivations for the creation of machines and robots is economic" (152). Future work, building on Mayor's text, would explore this motivation further, as technology is both mythic and material, even in the context of these narratives. That said, *Gods and Robots* is an important step in revealing how technology has functioned in both ways from the beginning of recorded history.

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